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C O N F I D E N T I A L MUSCAT 000795

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM MU
SUBJECT: OMAN ESTABLISHES HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

REF: A. MUSCAT 634
¶B. MUSCAT 625

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (U) As predicted by post contacts (refs A, B), Sultan Qaboos issued a royal decree on November 16 establishing an autonomous human rights commission. The commission will be located in Muscat and affiliated with the Majlis al-Dowla, the appointed upper house of Oman's bicameral advisory body. According to a public statement by Mohammad al-Alawi, Minister of Legal Affairs, "the human rights commission will have the same jurisdictions related to issuing reports granted to similar bodies elsewhere." In a statement to the Oman News Agency, Dr. Yahya bin Mahfoudh al-Mantheri, Chairman of the Majlis al-Dowla, declared that the issuance of the royal decree reflects "the Sultan's keenness to activate the provisions of the Basic Law of the state and underlines his commitment to maintaining human rights, freedom, and dignity."

¶2. (C) Sarah Hamad al-Sharji, a legal researcher for the Ministry of Legal Affairs, told poloff that she believed the commission would be "quite independent" based on the language of the decree. She opined that there would likely be a subsequent decree that would specify the structure, duties, and responsibilities of the commission as this two-stage process had previously been followed for the creation of new entities by royal decree. (Note: The November 16 decree referenced an attached annex which we are told will be published on December 2 and may contain further information about the commission. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) While local media predictably praised the Sultan's "wisdom" in establishing the human rights commission, reactions in Omani blogs and Internet fora were more varied. Some Omanis applauded the decree and stated their belief that the commission will play an important role in educating citizens and residents about their rights. Others thought the commission's affiliation with the Majlis al-Dowla might compromise its independence. Many fora participants expressed concern over how much authority the commission will have to track down and investigate human rights violations given the limited effectiveness of similar commissions in other Arab countries.

¶4. (C) Comments: Depending on its jurisdiction and membership, the creation of a human rights commission is a potentially important step in the protection of human rights in Oman. Its placement with the Majlis al-Dowla is an interesting choice, as both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Omani Police reportedly wanted the commission to be under their authority. Post will closely follow the commission's formation and attempt to contact its members once appointed. End Comment.

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